

# The Documentary Hypothesis

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The idea that the Pentateuch was not composed by Moses but was the work of several later authors is called “The Documentary Theory,” more accurately, “Hypothesis.” Its origination actually began with the Elohist’s view that terms such as *eloahim* and *el* were alternate names for Yahweh. Jews of the Middle Ages had raised these generic terms and titles to the rank of personal names in a bizarre attempt to conceal the sacred name and to use these words as substitutes. As a result, men began to read the books of Moses as if there were multiple names for the almighty.

In the twelfth century C.E. a Jewish scholar from Spain, named Abraham ibn Ezra, first proposed a multiple authorship of the Pentateuch (*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, chaps. VII-X). Abraham, faced with certain passages that pointed to a later editor’s hand, concluded that Moses did not write all of the five books attributed to him. His views set in motion a host of other critics who questioned Moses’ authorship. These critics included Jews and even Christians like Martin Luther. Christian humanists and philosophers like Masius (died 1573) and Thomas Hobbes (1651) added fuel to the fire. Isaac de la Peyrere (1655) then suggested that Moses had not even written the five books but rather several other men had.

As the result of Abraham ibn Ezra and some of those who followed him, the developing Documentary Hypothesis gained momentum under the Dutch Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza (*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, chap. VII to X). With a backdrop of religious misinterpretation, a lack of understanding of the parable nature of the Scriptures, and a limited knowledge of Hebrew, Spinoza concluded that all of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Nehemiah, was composed by the scribe Ezra in the fifth century B.C.E.

Spinoza was followed by Richard Simon, a French priest who wished to emphasize the importance of the Church over the Scriptures. Simon argued that the Scriptures were so laden

with inconsistency in order and chronology, and with stylistic differences, that it was impossible for Moses to have been the only author. He reasoned, as a result, that Catholic tradition was a more secure basis for faith than the Scriptures! Though officially denied by the Church, his sentiments nonetheless reflected the true underlying prejudice of most members of the Judaeo-Christian and Moslem faiths, a fact demonstrated by their actions rather than their words.

The debate was now raging, but unfortunately only false alternatives were presented—the various sides knowing little about which they spoke. Leclerc, a protestant, replied to Simon that he had gone too far but conceded that portions of the Pentateuch were written by scribes later than Moses. Then came the French physician, Jean Astruc, who published a work in 1753 entitled, *Conjectures About the Original Memoranda It Appears Which Moses Used to Compose the Book of Genesis*. Astruc made the claim that the deity was known by two different names, Yahve [Yahweh] and Elohim [eloahim], and that these two different names were the products of two different traditions. He suggested that the repetitions, contradictions, and chronological problems that scholars had come to “believe” actually arose as the result of the interweaving of these two different ancient sources. These sources were more ancient than Moses, he noted, but Moses brought them together.

After Astruc there arose men of greater skill, like the German scholars Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (*Einleitung*, 1780–1783) and K. D. Ilgen (*Die Urkunden des Jerusalemischen Tempelarchivs in ihrer Urgestat*, 1798). Then came Alexander Geddes (*Introduction to the Pentateuch and Joshua*, 1792), who proposed a fragmentary theory for the origin of the Pentateuch. He held that it was developed during the Solomonic era from many separate fragments dating back to the time of Moses and before. These men were followed by a work published in 1806–1807 by W. M. L. De Wette,

entitled *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 1807, who reasoned yet another source should be added to the Yahweh and Eloahim traditions, which he called the Deuteronomic code. Between 1807 and 1853 the “fragmentary hypothesis” and the “supplementary hypothesis” were fully developed.

In 1853 Hermann Hupfield (*Die Quellen der Genesis und die Art ihrer Zusammensetzung*) set forth the argument that there were in fact two separate Elohim sources. Hupfield’s work drew a great deal of attention from the Tanach (Old Testament) scholars. Hupfield was followed in 1866 by K. H. Graf, who developed the suggestions of the scholars E. Reuss, J. George, and W. Vatke and held that the document labeled E<sup>1</sup> (called P for Priestly Code), rather than being the earliest of the documents, was in fact the most recent. A. Kuenen (*The Religion of Israel*, 1869-1870) assured the triumph of the J, E, D, and P order for these assumed separate documents. These conclusions set the stage for the primary mover of the modern Documentary Hypothesis, Julius Wellhausen.

Wellhausen restated the Documentary Hypothesis with great skill and persuasiveness and supported the J, E, D, P sequence as an evolutionary process (*Die Komposition des Hexateuchs*, 1878; *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, 1878). According to Wellhausen, Israel’s concept of God evolved from the animism and polytheism of the patriarchal days into the henotheism in the time of Moses, and from there to the ethical monotheism of the prophets of the eighth century B.C.E. His evolutionary views in Biblical literature were often likened to those of his contemporary Charles Darwin, and he was certainly influenced by the evolution movement which was gaining popularity among scholars of that time. From Wellhausen stems the numerous modern interpretations advocated today.

From such work the Tanach scholars came to accept the hypothesis that the Pentateuch was the result of the blending together of J (Yahweh), E (Eloahim), D (Deuteronomy), and P (Priestly Code) documents. The belief that there were four major documents that lay behind the five books of Moses is now almost universally accepted by biblical scholars. But one must keep in mind that the thrust of the work of these men has been to attack the credibility of the Scriptures. This assault comes from both religious and secular scholarship.

Many of the proponents of this multi-authorship view are priests and rabbis, whose purpose is to extol the virtues of “the Church” and their own respective religious “traditions” over the value of Scriptures. In their mind-set, what they perceive as “contradictions” in the Scriptures serve to justify their reliance on “Church,” i.e. “Christian,” Moslem, or “Jewish” traditions. Human derived religious philosophy and interpretation is then perceived as a more secure basis for their faith. Though claiming a “belief” in the Scriptures, their actions show that their true intent is to justify their own respective religious interpretations and traditions as well as their own personal views.

It was as a result of this attack on the credibility of the books of Moses that the modern Elohist school and their Documentary Hypothesis gained popularity. Both the secular and religious Elohists had found a vested interest in discrediting the Pentateuch. The secular scholars pointed to their findings as justification for not giving any credence to the Scriptures, while the religious Elohists use it to attack the Scriptural doctrine that there is only one, personal name for our heavenly father.

For a response to the Documentary Hypothesis see our Topic entitled *Variations in the Pentateuch*.